

# Paradise Calling

Famed for its romance factor, there's also a side to the Maldives' idyllic atolls that blends relaxation with adventure, making it a blissful escape for those seeking an action-packed getaway...

*By Yi-Hwa Hanna*

The mere mention of the Maldives typically conjures up thoughts of white sand beaches, crystal-clear azure waters and romantic sunset strolls—and while the picture perfect scenery does make for an unbeatably amorous backdrop, it can also be a great place for an actively fulfilling break.

The moment we touched down in Malé's Ibrahim Nasir airport—a mere four hour or so journey from the UAE—it was easy to instantly switch into holiday mode. The airport opens out to the Indian Ocean, and the gusts of salty breeze were a truly welcome pick-me-up after being cooped up in a stuffy aircraft cabin. Our destination, the Sun Siyam Iru Fushi Resort ([thesunsiyam.com](http://thesunsiyam.com)), was a 45 minute seaplane journey from Malé airport. Since the plane only operates during daylight, we opted for an overnight flight from Abu Dhabi and were therefore thrilled to discover that not only was there a comfy lounge to wait in before our seaplane took off, it even had free WiFi and refreshments.



My companion and I had both travelled in small local planes before, but it was our first time travelling by seaplane. “How bumpy do you think the ride will be?” my friend asked with trepidation as we approached the lounge, only to breathe a huge sigh of relief as we gazed out over the twenty-odd planes of varying sizes readying for flight. This was no ramshackle service: operated by Trans Maldivian Air, the oldest air transfer operator in the country, the planes looked sturdy and reliable, with everyone from families with tiny tots to honeymooning couples flying out to various different islands around the atolls. At USD540 per adult for a round-trip journey, the flight comes with a luggage allowance of 25kg. Our suitcases were popped into the hold, we were strapped in right behind the pilots, and soon we were floating serenely over the water with killer views.

### Island Bliss

A short hop and a skip later, the plane began its descent and we were soon sputtering to a halt at the end of a long jetty. Squeals of delight abounded among the plane’s passengers as the resort came into view: Spread over 52 acres, this sprawling property in the Noonu Atoll boasts hundreds of villas dotted around their own exclusive island, and the iconic water villas perched on their wooden stilts were an arresting sight. Situated right at the end of the jetty is the resort’s main gathering place. Aptly named Water’s Edge, lofty couches are sat on white sand—peppered with the occasional hammock—where guests can lie back and take in everything from the sunset to the various arrivals both to and from the resort and the dive centre. A retro-style ice cream parlour—that serves up sweet, light homemade ice creams all day long—is one of the first things you see upon arrival, right next to a surprisingly well-stocked shop

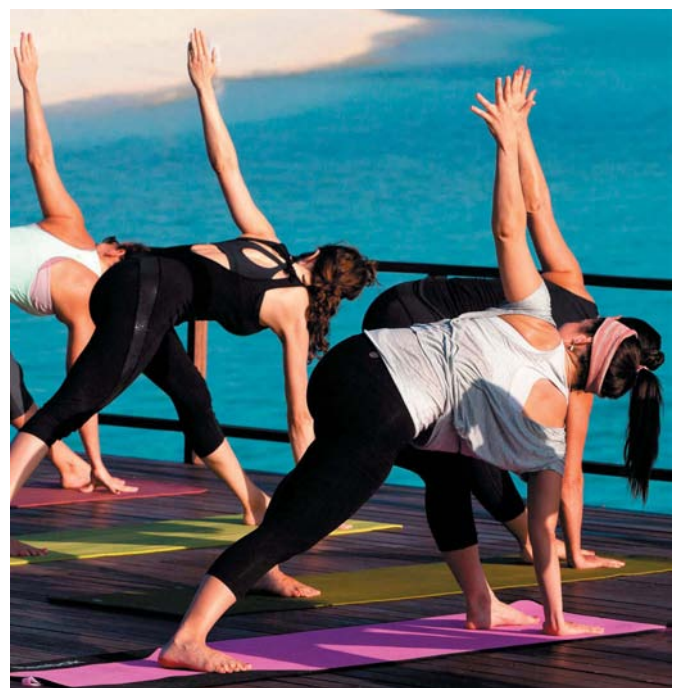


selling souvenirs, fine jewellery, holiday essentials and more. Nearby, a recreational area boasting table hockey, pool tables and a variety of drinks and snacks beckoned. “It’s like its own mini village—it feels like we’re on a proper island, not just a resort!” my friend exclaimed delightfully. I was inclined to agree. While we’d been gaping at the sights and sounds, the staff had whisked our bags away and we soon found ourselves seated at the reception area sipping on fresh fruit punch as they talked us through the resort’s various facilities. So extensive that the island map became an essential take-along each time we left the room, the Sun Siyam Iru Fushi is not the sort of place where you’ll ever be short of something to do. We’d had an idea of the activities we wanted to partake in before our arrival, but by the time we’d sat down and gone through them with our dedicated butler—yes, the resort provides a butler service to guide you through anything from restaurant reservations and navigating your way around the resort to booking up activities and entertainment—we were biting our lips in indecision, fretting about how much we could (or couldn’t) cram in during our four-day stay. “Don’t worry about it yet, just take the brochures with you and you can decide later!” said our butler Jaaweedh.

We hopped into a golf buggy and headed off to our room. While the resort isn’t so big that you can walk around the entire island if you so choose, it is large enough to warrant a buggy service, with various pickup points designated around the island designed to make things convenient for guests who decide not to take advantage of them on a more spontaneous whim rather than through the on-call service.

Our room was a vast dome villa with a thatched style roof boasting a plush king-sized bed, plenty of seating areas, and all

of the amenities you’d expect from a five-star luxury resort and more—aside from the large TV, well-stocked minibar, plush bathrobes, hairdryer, and Crabtree & Evelyn toiletries, I loved the fact that they even thought to provide adaptors in each bedside plug socket, along with clever mosquito-repelling bracelets and extra bedding. In the open-air bathroom, the option of a rain shower, covered shower and jacuzzi bathtub, along with double sinks and a resting area, meant getting ready was transformed from a perfunctory experience into a



## Life and Love

genuine delight. Our only qualm? How dark it was in the room. “At least it’s romantic, it makes perfect sense for honeymooning couples,” my friend pointed out—I could see her point, but considering my already challenging eyesight, I spent the rest of our trip leaving the floor to ceiling curtains open as often as possible to let in the glorious natural light streaming in from our villa’s backyard. And what a backyard it was, with a private infinity pool, a cabana, and two of our own loungers looking onto the beach. We had to stop ourselves from sighing over the interiors to hurriedly get ready for a long, languorous dinner.

### Gourmet Fancies

The resort has 12 dining areas to choose from, offering everything from Asian fusion, to seafood and Mediterranean fare. There was so much variety that monotony was never a problem during our stay. Happily, the food was all excellent: While the resort could easily serve up sub-standard quality since guests are left with no other choice (being at a resort that’s its very

own island will do that to you), instead, here they take their cuisine seriously. This isn’t the sort of place where you’ll be stuck pawing at stodgy French fries and greasy burgers—instead, restaurants like Islander’s Grill and the watertop Flavours serve up gourmet dishes with plenty of healthy options, like fat chunks of grilled, delicately seasoned octopus and tender, delicate baked reef fish. As many of the

ingredients as possible are grown in the island’s own gardens and greenhouses, while a majority of the seafood is locally caught. If frozen items are used, it’s usually specified on the menu, allowing guests to make an informed choice prior to ordering their meal.

### Fun and Sun

It’s not all about the food and drink though—to us, the huge appeal of this particular resort

lies in the seriously impressive array of activities on offer. Diving experiences that take you out to shipwrecks, and bright and bustling underwater areas teeming with sea life can be found at a majority of good resorts in the Maldives, with many even offering their own private reefs in which to snorkel (which the Sun Siyam Iru Fushi does as well, of course). The resort’s dive centre does not disappoint, with snorkelling, diving and undersea excursions being popular ways for many guests to spend their time, but for us the water sports centre was one of the most exciting features we’d ever seen in a Maldivian resort to date. Here, you can try everything from waterskiing to board-based sports, and there is so much on offer that active types will find it extremely trying to pick just a few to enjoy during a several-day stay. Paddleboarding on waters this blue is an experience no SUP lover should miss, though a word of warning: the waves here can get quite strong due to the wind, so while it’s totally safe, inexperienced paddleboarders might want to opt for a full lesson with an instructor if they don’t want to spend their entire session wiping out. If you’re seeking a more open-sea adventure, a catamaran journey is a great way to get in touch with the ocean—we were lucky enough to even catch sight of some dolphins during our trip, and while we’d been gutted not to have signed up for a dedicated dolphin-sighting excursion, the catamaran was so close to the water that the dolphins were within arms reach. It was exhilarating, to say the least, and the best part? They’ll even teach you to sail if you’re willing to learn. Jetskis make for another fun way to spend 30-60 minutes, though a word to the wise: listen carefully when the dive centre staff explain which areas are restricted and which are safe. If you stray from the approved zones, not only will you be





risking your own safety but also those of other guests, including divers and snorkellers. Staff are always at hand to make sure things don't go awry though, which is in large part why most of the safe zones for the more independent water sports are within a short distance from the water sports centre—so they can keep a watchful and protective eye on you. If land-based exercise is what you crave, the resort does boast a beautifully equipped gym, with a wide range of equipment including treadmills, ellipticals, free weights, weight machines, mats, bosu balls and more.

### A World of Wellness

What we'd recommend, if you have the time, is a yoga class held in the spa. The Sun Siyam Iru Fushi has one of the largest spas in the region, so big in fact that it's practically like its own village. Deliciously sore from days on end of mornings at the gym, runs along the beach and countless watersport activities, we decided it was time to stretch ourselves out and keep our flexibility on point, and a yoga session did just that. A

blend of various different yoga styles, our instructor focused mainly on Ashtanga, teaching us a variety of common and some more unusual positions amidst the tranquility of the spa village. Being able to do yoga while surrounded by leafy green vegetation, birds chirping nearby and a natural breeze in the air was a truly unforgettable experience, and by the time we wrapped up our session with a few long, deep breaths and one resounding "Om," we were ready to topple into bed for a nap. Fortunately, we'd booked in for a massage instead—the award-winning spa does have a couples room if you're so inclined, and there are so many treatments on offer you could easily go for a daily indulgence if your schedule and budget allow it. We chose a massage, figuring it would help ease our aching muscles, and much to our delight, the Holistic Rejuvenation treatment we opted for also included a facial at the end—a perfect way to clear our skin out and restore radiance after days spent out and about in the sun. The spa, with its rippling

streams and lush greenery that fills the air with the heady scent of flowers, is built around the concept of Ayurvedic practises, meaning everything is designed to suit the centuries-old beliefs of this method of alternative healing. In keeping with this philosophy, the spa also offers guided meditation sessions. If you plan to spend an entire day there—a likely possibility—there's also light and healthy food and drink to be had from the specially-created spa menu and a huge selection of tea (we suggest the ginger tea) on offer.

By the end of our four-day trip, I felt as though we'd been there for weeks, and for the first time in months, I felt well and truly zen. While free WiFi is available throughout the resort (save for the restaurants), I was delighted to find myself, for once, willingly not checking my email and able to genuinely switch off. Not once did my friend and I ever feel alienated for not being a honeymooning couple in such a traditionally romantic place—rather, among the happy families, groups of friends and, yes, couples in love, we felt right at home. ■



### SNAP-HAPPY

When you're in a setting this beautiful, it's only natural to want to capture some of the joy on camera. Unfortunately, when much of the day is spent in and out of the water, it's all too easy to wind up with no photographic souvenirs of your trip because you're too worried to take your DSLR or smartphone anywhere near the water. Enter the Canon PowerShot D30 (Dhs1,212): We borrowed one of these nifty waterproof digital compact cameras for our trip to test just how waterproof it really was, and happily, we can report that this is our new fave holiday accessory—especially when watersports are involved. It stood up to SUP sessions, a drenched catamaran journey, and countless swims in the salty sea, providing us with great action shots atop the turquoise waters, automatically-lit, crisp underwater shots of sea life and priceless James Bond-esque beach shots. It's a winner!